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PROGRAM FOR WESTERN ACTION IN BERLIN

By Karl Brandt

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STUDENT - GROUP HOMES

for West Berlin's

Free University

A Project for Western Initiative

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This proposal results from my experiences when living in company with students from the East Zone in Heidelberg and Göttingen in 1948/49 while serving on the faculty of both universities, and particularly while teaching as a Stanford University exchange professor during the 1954/55 Winter Semester in the Free University of Berlin.

If it is not, in execution, whittled down to insignificant proportions or disseminated in piecemeal fashion through various sporadic dormitory beginnings, but is carried on as a united action of German-American partnership, this project would make the two universities of West Berlin far more a symbol of progressive ideas for the youth in all satellite countries, but even put them far ahead of the West-German universities. Such results would be attained only if the scope were large enough and the action completed within a period not to exceed three years.

This project does not have as its goal the creation of dormitories, student hotels, fraternity houses, or student club houses, but is patterned after the ideas underlying the outstanding experiments in West Germany with "Studentische Wohnheime" and "Studentische Gemeinschaftshäuser." It deals primarily not with bricks and facilities but with some ideas on the formation of a new elite for the German nation of tomorrow.

So far, large American funds have been spent on rebuilding the intellectual working facilities for Berlin's youth, but little if anything has been done to improve their living conditions.

Palo Alto, California  
January 1956

Karl Brandt

## I. The Challenge

The greatest asset the Western world holds in the foreign policy of NATO and in ideological warfare with the Soviets, is Berlin, an island of Western democracy and freedom deep within the colonial belt of Soviet imperialism. While the Soviets leave no stone unturned to undermine this outpost of the West ideologically and eventually to eliminate it and pull all of Germany over to their side, the West (and this means first of all the United States) acts only half-heartedly to win the battle against the Soviets there. But, ominously enough, Germany's ultimate position is far from certain. For the Germany people--in West as well as East Germany--Berlin is the theatre where they judge how honest and serious is the effort of the Western powers to achieve reunification. This calls for action that is constructive, symbolizes Western ideals and ideas, and has enduring appeal. The constructive moves, such as diminishing unemployment, reconstructing the city, and aiding refugees, that have been made create good will, but cannot count forever in the changing scene of the cold war and the rapidly shifting atmosphere of West-European politics.

The most uniquely creative and almost explosive assets of the Western world inside Berlin are its two universities, the Freie Universität and the Technische Universität. The Free University in Dahlem, with its resplendent new buildings donated by the Ford Foundation, is the legitimate successor to the former Humboldt Universität, now located in the Soviet sector, while the Technical University is the reconstructed Technische Hochschule. Each of these two institutions of higher learning has approximately 8,000 students, more than one-third of whom come

from homes in the Soviet zone in defiance of Soviet orders to stay away from these "centers of imperialist indoctrination."

These 16,000 students are probably a major part of the most influential element of Germany's future leadership, the large number of students in West-German universities notwithstanding. Berlin is the place where East and West are in direct contact, where the ideological battle is being waged with every means available, and where the West must win that battle.

These two universities and their research institutes deserve the greatest possible moral, intellectual, and material aid jointly from West Germany and the United States--far more than they receive today. At present the American public is in the process of deleting Germany from the list of problem areas because the economy of West Germany is booming. No error could be more serious than this. Divided Germany--half its land and one-fourth of its people a pawn in Soviet hands, flanked by an unstable France--remain's America's No. 1 problem-ally.

## II. The Most Urgent Need

If anything is needed in Germany in the future, it is coherence among the leading citizens in regard to willingness and experience in cooperating, in tackling civic tasks, and in compromising intelligently on controversial issues. This could be greatly advanced if a large part of the student body could live in adequate modern quarters shared and operated by freely formed groups (not dormitories) with the opportunity of eating meals jointly, of enjoying social hours, and in arriving at agreement on major issues of public problems and policy by informal discussion in an environment which the students consider as a "home."

Most of the students of West Berlin are hardworking, intelligent, and serious in the pursuit of their studies. Yet they are without adequate means. Most of them live in extremely poor quarters for which they pay more than they can afford, and to make ends meet trim their food bill to below-subsistence level. Student rooms are scattered all over the ruin-studded city, for the most part subleased from tenants of apartments or houses at 40 to 60 DM per month. The rooms are located far from the universities, particularly from the Free University in the Dahlem area, where the density of housing is very low. Hence much time is spent commuting on over-crowded busses, trams, or a slow-motion subway to and from school.

I have seen scores of such student rooms; their poverty and proletarian style are far below what the Western world considers a minimum standard. The contrast between the modern style and the trimness of the university buildings, lecture halls, and offices and the miniature slum cubicles and often poorly heated attic rooms in which the students live

is particularly bleak.

Combined with this housing misery is the inadequacy of the students' food arrangements. Many students subsist on self-prepared sandwiches and only occasionally a warm meal. The shortage of time, aggravated by the bad location of the quarters and poor transportation, the slim purse, and the congestion in student messes and low-priced restaurants are contributing factors.

Worst of all, being forced to live for several years in such scattered and mostly inadequate quarters that are anything but a home, the students who form the civic community of these two great universities are not a coherent body composed of groups of friends or teams with mutual interests. By and large they are an amorphous mass of individuals completely absorbed in their intellectual pursuits, proceeding in the early morning as strap-hangers from distant corners of the city to the university just in time for lectures and laboratory classes, and in the late afternoon or evening dispersing back to their rooms to continue work for the next day's classes and seminars.

Most of them have no facilities for enjoying company, and sheer adverse physical circumstances prevent them from associating in circles or living-community groups. This situation aggravates the shortcomings of education in German schools and in the home, which do not achieve nearly the social adjustment required in a democracy of responsible citizens.

While at any time in any country only a certain number of students will enjoy and benefit from life in a group home, it is the view of the

leading educators in all German universities that a substantial part of the university reform can be achieved only in combination with such living and working in group homes. I refer here to the excellent report by Professor Walter Peter Fuchs of Heidelberg University, *STUDENTISCHE WOHNHEIME UND GEMEINSCHAFTSHAUSER IN WESTDEUTSCHLAND* (Frankfurt, 1951), which was the result of efforts of the Verband Deutscher Studentenwerke, and to the brochure by Dr. Walther Killy of the Free University of Berlin, *STUDIUM GENERALE UND STUDENTISCHES GEMEINSCHAFTSLEBEN* (Berlin, 1952). The latter publication makes, among others, the following observations:

"A further hint at the genuine community living is the broad tendency of student groups to set up homes for living (Wohnheime). In these homes a pedagogic process is being intensified which already existed without them. The partly extremely differing, but in the undertakings of the community joint, student groups face the necessity of disputing with each other, of questioning each other, of reviewing prejudices, and of dropping outmoded customs in favor of new tasks." "After all, it is not surprising that for many students the Student Living Groups (Studentengemeinden) are actually their proper home (Heimatort) within the university . . . ."

In West Germany 27 universities have more than 100 Student Group Homes with an almost infinite variety of arrangement, style, and number of residents. While some of these fail to achieve their real purposes, many of them belong to the best new venture in German higher education. In my view, the most successful examples are to be found among the 13 homes in Göttingen (in particular the Akademische Burse), in the Leibniz Kolleg in Tübingen, and in the Collegium Academicum at Heidelberg.

In Berlin both universities have undertaken an ambitious housing project 20 minutes distance by subway from both institutions. This project, supported by the McCloy Foundation and the City of Berlin, envisages dormitories for 500 students plus a clubhouse. This excellent arrangement



is very different from the project here proposed. Aside from this housing project, Berlin has the International Student Home Eichkamp, which has several bungalows and a clubhouse, and now has space for perhaps 130. Students of the Technical University operate their houses. Yet, even if these beginnings were similar to what is suggested here--which they are not--the scope of the enterprise, in view of a joint enrollment of 16,000 students, is dwarfed almost to insignificance.

There is at present still a unique opportunity which may vanish forever in the next few years in a metropolitan area like Berlin. By an early HICOG decision, the Free University was located in the garden-city part of West Berlin, where open areas exist. It is still possible to acquire up to 100 of the former residential manors (preserved, rebuilt, or still bomb-wrecked) and vacant lots within walking distance of the University buildings. While real estate prices have been rising, the cost of such properties is still very reasonable. Once these lots are absorbed for residential or other public purposes the most attractive feature of the whole project will no longer exist: proximity to the Free University.

### III. The Project

I propose tackling the entire problem posed above at top speed on a larger scope and with an entirely different line of approach. (In view of my familiarity with the situation at the Free University, and in view of its domain in humanistic disciplines, this project is addressed exclusively to this university and not to the Technical University, for which, of course, a similar project should be started.

- A. A Foundation for Student-Group Homes should be formed by private means from Berlin, West Germany, and the United States for the purpose of acquiring, developing, and maintaining real estate located as close as possible to the center of the University, and leasing it, at substantially below commercial rents, under specific contract to student groups which fulfill certain requirements and commit themselves to operate them as group homes.
- B. The Foundation, its real-estate holdings, and operations should be free from taxation or other public levy.
- C. The capital of the Foundation should be contributed in equal shares from three sources: from private German donors, from Counterpart Funds, and from new American foundation gifts or other private donations. The German initiative should be sparked by an American offer of a fixed sum provided it is matched by German donors. The Foundation should be entitled to encumber its real estate with first mortgages.
- D. The goal should be to create a total of 100 homes in a period not to exceed three years.

- E. The real estate should be acquired in such fashion as not to defeat its purpose by causing speculators to purchase all properties under consideration.
- F. The real estate should consist of properly located a) vacant lots and b) large villas that can be reconditioned and altered to suit the purpose.

To demonstrate the difference from any institutions in the totalitarian world or elsewhere, the aim should not only be to avoid uniformity of architectural appearance, but on the contrary to develop the widest possible variety of styles and arrangements and to vary also the size of the homes, i.e., the number of students to be accommodated in each of them.

For the sake of maximum economy of operation, it would be desirable to have a minimum of 35 single rooms in one house, while for reasons of coherence within a group and facility of forming it and keeping it near the house capacity, the upper limit should lie somewhere near 50.

Each house should contain one simply but well equipped room for each student, a central heating system, a kitchen, a laundry, from 15 to 20 common toilet, shower-bath, and wash-basin facilities, a dining room, a social room, and a library.

- G. The type of houses to be acquired either by altering existing houses or by new construction should be decided by the Foundation
  - a) after a competent survey of the homes in use in West-German universities and review of the experience acquired; and b) by an international competition for architects, which would supply enough variety for all the homes to be built.
- H. The Student-Group Homes should be offered for lease to any legitimate student group registered with the authorities of the University that commits itself to the careful fulfillment of its contracted duty to operate the house for the benefit of its members

according to the rules laid down by the Foundation.

The contract should stipulate that the student group, represented by its duly elected officers, assumes the responsibility of managing and maintaining the house, of hiring and firing the needed personnel (particularly the cook), of providing the meals desired, of charging its members no more than a certain maximum rent per room, and of enforcing strictly the rules not to admit members of the opposite sex to individual rooms, or to keep or dispense liquor in the house.

#### IV. Pitfalls to Avoid

By no means all West-German experiments in housing students have met with success; the project at the University of Frankfurt is a conspicuous example of failure. The students dislike hotel sorts of arrangements or anything that looks like or smacks of barracks or dormitories. They also object strongly to double-occupancy rooms. These deep-seated preferences must be respected even at the expense of maximum economy.

For reasons of ideological combat against Soviet solutions, even any uniformity of student-group homes should be studiously avoided. Respect for the dignity of the individual and priority on freedom should find their symbolic expression in a maximum variety of appearance and internal arrangement with regard to these dwellings. No two homes should be identical, which would emphasize the individuality of each group.

In order that action can be taken promptly without accompanying bureaucratic red tape, the Foundation should be independent of the University and the municipality of West Berlin.

## V. Conclusion

If this project were to be launched in 1956 by making initially (say by September 1956) 25 homes available to qualifying student-home groups, the impact upon the student body would be profound. Before reaching its final form, the contract would be discussed with ASTA (the all-student committee), so that all the students could participate in its formation. The homes would be opened for inspection by all candidates for group membership.

Low rent and low prices for meal service would make the project so attractive that the formation of home-sharing groups would be stimulated. Once the living in these group homes in the immediate neighborhood of the University itself began, the students in each group would inevitably work to improve the democratic procedures of making decisions.

If the project were carried to completion by the fall of 1958, about 3,500 of the 8,000 students of the Free University would be living in group homes. The students in those homes could be expected to comprise the main body of citizens with a knack for leadership in public affairs.

It is my assumption that the whole project would require no more than \$2.5 million, of which \$1.5 million would be needed as cash while the remainder could be obtained as mortgages. Hence the total contribution needed as American donations and Counterpart Funds would be \$1 million.